FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS

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FDA, USDA FACE PROBLEM OF WIDESPREAD PCB CONTAMINATION

The widely-publicized incident in which polychlorinated biphenyls contaminated fish meal, feed, eggs, and chickens (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Aug. 23, Page 20) may be the tip of an iceberg which is confronting the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department with thorny problems and near-impossible decisions.

As three new contamination incidents came to FDA attention last week, top-ranking FDA and USDA staffers met in top-secret, deadly serious discussion. More such meetings are scheduled for this week.

PCBs apparently are showing up from environmental contamination, not just from industrial accidents when fluids leak from heat-exchange units. Government officials note that PCBs are used in a multitude of paper and other products, and an expert on PCBs told a Senate subcommittee recently that: "PCB is now universally distributed in the terrestrial, fresh-water and marine environments of North America" (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Aug. 9, Page 7).

If the environmental contamination turns out to be widespread, FDA-ers may be forced to adopt the position of Rep. Ryan (D-N.Y.) who has proposed legislation banning use of PCBs.

However, this would not immediately solve the problem of widespread contamination by PCBs. The major problem may well involve animal and poultry feed. FDA is finding feed with PCBs, and there is no administrative guideline for any PCBs in feed. In other words, all feed found with PCBs is illegal and subject to regulatory action.

Question of Guideline for Feeds Pondered

The agency may well be forced to the position of setting an administrative guideline for PCBs in feed. There are such guidelines for PCBs in chickens and in eggs, and the case may be made that it is illogical to hold a tighter rein on animal fo[od] than on food for humans.

On the other hand, because PCBs build up in cumulative fashion in the fat of animals and for other reasons, FDA-ers say there is no adequate data on which to base a rational administrative guideline for PCBs in feed. Proponents of a guideline say there was just as little hard data to justify the guidelines in chickens and eggs. This uncertainty has led to sharp disagreement over the potential health ha[z]ard of PCBs.

If widespread contamination of feed is discovered and if there is no guideline, FDA would appear to have two choices. One is to seize a sizeable percentage of the animal feed supply. The other is to avoid analyzing the feed for PCBs.

FDA-ers say at this time there are insufficient facts available upon which to base any major decision or to set an agency policy. Not only that, but such other crises as the botulinum scare have drained FDA's manpower to the point that the agency lacks the resources to obtain the needed data on PCBs.

The problem was thought to be one of industrial accident, as in the problem which arose at East Coast Terminal when PCBs from a heat-exchange unit leaked into fish meal. However, FDA then discovered contaminated fish meal at a plant in Pensacola, Fla., and preliminary investigation indicated no obvious leaks from the pasteurization system.

Despite the lack of known leaks, samples of processed fish meal revealed residues from .5 p.p.m. to 1.5 p.p.m., and one lot was placed under detention. FDA is following up by sampling railroad cars containing fish meal, and one sample from a lot released July 23 showed no PCBs.

PCBs Found in Fish Meal As It Was Imported

The fish meal is imported from Peru, and FDA last week sent inspectors to the dock at Port Arthur, Tex., to sample the fish meal as it arrived in this country. Preliminary samples from a bulk pile from the boat revealed PCBs at levels from 6.7 p.p.m. to 7.3 p.p.m.

This finding has led to speculation about whether the PCBs resulted from processing overseas or from environmental contamination. Possible contamination before or during shipment is being investigated.

Another leak of PCBs from processing equipment was uncovered last week, this time in an Illinois plant processing meat scrap meal. FDA found approximately 50,000 pounds of rendered meat meal had been contaminated, and the company is voluntarily holding 40,000 pounds of the meal and 750,000 pounds of animal feed made from the other 10,000 pounds. None of the animal feed containing contaminated meat meal is believed to have been used. A preliminary analysis of the meat meal shows PCBs at 1 p.p.m., and action may be taken after completion of analyses by FDA's Chicago District.

Another problem will exist for FDA involving blended feed containing the meat meal. If PCBs are in the meat meal at 1 p.p.m., they may not be detectable in the blended feed. On the one hand, the blended feed might be "legal." On the other, FDA has won court victories based on the principle that a violative product cannot be made "legal" by dilution.

Still another report was received by USDA last week indicating that routine samples of poultry in Water Valley, Miss., showed up to 17.1 p.p.m. of PCBs in spent laying hens. The investigation has traced the birds to a farm in Oklahoma and the feed to an Oklahoma feed mill. It has not been determined if fish meal was used as a

of the feed or if the contamination of the chickens resulted from the feed. Eggs from birds on the same farm are being analyzed for PCBs.

57 More Lots of Eggs Analyzed

In action resulting from the initial fish meal incident in North Carolina, FDA last week analyzed 57 more lots of shell eggs, bringigg the total examined to 157 lots. Six of the new samples tested had PCBs above the "interim" guideline of 5 p.p.m. Four of these violative samples were from Central Carolina Farms, which has not shipped eggs interstate since Aug. 10. The other two were from a Georgia hatchery where the eggs are being destroyed.

Of the 157 samples analyzed so far, 57 were found to contain PCBs over 0.5 p.p.m. Thirty-eight of the samples came from Central Carolina Farms, which is not shipping interstate. Six of the violative samples came from the Georgia hatchery, where the eggs are being destroyed. Until about a month ago, this firm sold surplus breeder eggs to an egg breaker, and FDA informed USDA about this.

Of the other violative samples, one each came from (1) another hatchery in Georgia, with no food-feed use background; (2) a North Carolina hatchery which sells surplus breeder eggs to an intrastate shell egg dealer; and (3) a North Carolina grower who sells shell eggs intrastate. In the last two instances, FDA informed North Carolina officials.

There have been suggestions that feed contaminated with PCBs could be diverted to use in non-food producing animals. However, it is understood that PCBs have been found to be toxic to cats and minks, thus apparently ruling out this possibility.

USDA, after launching an intensified testing program, still was finding that most products were below FDA guidelines. In a summary released late Thursday, August 26, USDA's Consumer and Marketing Service said:

> "To date, USDA has analyzed the following number of samples of slaughtered poultry and hogs: hens, 352; broilers, 126; turkeys, 143; hogs, 66. Out of this total, one lot of turkeys, one lot of hens, and one hog contained more than the maximum acceptable level of PCBs."

Another CMS official noted that the hog's feeding could not be traced definitely to the East Coast Terminal contamination incident. The USDA statement continued:

> "The range of PCBs found per million parts of total edible tissue is - - hens, 0 to 5.3; broilers, 0 to 0.7: turkeys, 0 to 11.8. In one hog, the fat contained 7.8 p.p.m. of PCBs. The current maximum acceptable level for ready-to-eat poultry and pork is 5 p.p.m." MONS 032718

Of 169 tests of egg products, USDA said, 161 were below the acceptable maximum of 0.5 p.p.m. and eight lots of liquid, frozen or dried egg products from four producers in Southeast states had ranges of from 0.6 to 2.8 p.p.m.

USDA said it would continue its intensified sampling, which, it noted, supplements an ongoing surveillance program in which 3,000 poultry samples are analyzed annually for chlorinated hydrocarbons, including PCBs.

Ryan asked a series of sharp questions of FDA concerning the agency's handling of the East Coast Terminal PCB incident, referring to his record of urging "the appropriate federal agencies to take preventive action necessary to forestall the polluting of our environment and our food with this hazardous chemical."

The Congressman sought a full explanation of the basis for interim guidelines and wanted to know the dates on which testing of shell egg products was begun. He also asked for suggestions as to additional legislative authority.

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QUANDARY POSED BY CAMPBELL SOUP BOTULINUM INCIDENT

Campbell Soup Company experts were meeting throughout last week with both the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration on a major question with implications for most of the modern food processing industry - - how can botulinum show up in a product of one of the most advanced food processing plants in the nation.

Late Saturday, Aug. 21, the company discovered clostridium botulinum type A or B in a chicken vegetable soup that was already being recalled because of "soft swells." It alerted FDA, USDA, and the public via a press release. The "tri-partite" investigation proceeded through the week, checking through an elaborate and computerized quality control program at Campbell's model plant in Paris, Texas.

The "soft swells" which triggered the original recall were discovered in chicken vegetable soup on four different production days ranging from late June through mid-July. When these recalled products started coming back in, the company found that some of the cans had "hard swells," indicating greater problems and triggering the testing for botulinum., All of the hard swells were found to have resulted from one day's production, July 15.

Code number of the lot is 07P13 701X. Of 18,000 cases in the four lots - - all designated 07P13 - - Campbell had collected 15,000 by the Saturday of the discovery of botulinum.

States in which the chicken vegetable soup was distributed were Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming. There had been no confirmed cases of botulism as this issue of FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS went to press.

The Campbell's incident contrasts sharply in some respects with the earlier Bon Vivant vichyssoise incident, primarily because of the difference in quality control techniques in the two plants (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Aug. 23, Page 10).